

Hundred and sixty-fourth Session

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PARIS, 17 May 2002
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Item 8.2 of the provisional agenda

**APPLICATION OF 162 EX/DECISION 9.2
CONCERNING EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS
IN THE OCCUPIED ARAB TERRITORIES**

SUMMARY

In this document the Director-General reports to the Executive Board on the measures taken to give effect to 162 EX/Decision 9.2 and the situation facing the educational and cultural institutions in the Palestinian Autonomous Territories since the recent events.

This revised version supersedes the previous version.

INTRODUCTION

1. In the framework of 31 C/Resolution 43 of the General Conference and pursuant to 162 EX/Decision 9.2, the Executive Board has included this item in the agenda of its 164th session. The Board invited the Director-General to continue financial assistance for Palestinian students and to pay particular attention to the quality of education in the current emergency situation and also to the revision of the Education and Culture Development Plan. The Director-General was also invited to continue his efforts vis-à-vis the Israeli authorities with a view to preserving the Arab cultural identity of the occupied Syrian Golan and so that they cease imposing their curricula on the students of that occupied territory.

I. IMPLEMENTATION OF ACTIVITIES IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE PLAN OF ACTION IN FAVOUR OF THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE

2. Since this decision was adopted, the situation in the Gaza Strip and, in particular, in the West Bank has continued to deteriorate. The execution of activities provided for in the framework of the plan of action in favour of the Palestinian people was considerably slowed down by this unfavourable environment and virtually came to a halt on 29 March last when the Israeli army occupied several autonomous Palestinian towns.

3. During this six-month period, the activities carried out have been mostly decentralized, enabling:

- an improved contribution to be made to the advancement of UNESCO projects and initiatives on the ground, in circumstances that were already very difficult at the time;
- a close link to be maintained with the Palestinian partners, in particular the Palestinian Committee for UNESCO and the Palestinian Ministries concerned;
- participation in United Nations inter-agency coordination meetings and meetings with donors.

4. Accordingly, the UNESCO Programme for Palestine (UPP) essentially helped three kinds of activities to be carried out:

- (a) Strengthening the various institutions of the Palestinian Authority, in particular through:
- the organization of training workshops, in close cooperation with the Palestinian Ministry for Youth;
 - the training of young Palestinians in various areas (culture, science, education, etc.) in institutes and universities abroad;
 - the training of young Palestinian professionals, at workshops held in Nablus by the head of the “Multipurpose Community Resource Centre” (MCRC);
 - emergency assistance given to the Ministry of Education to enable some 24 schools to hold “catch-up” classes for children of school age, prevented from attending lessons by the mobility restrictions and military or police roadblocks;

- (b) Strengthening education for peace and tolerance, through:
- the promotion of early childhood education, by means of summer camps enabling young people to familiarize themselves with basic environmental protection concepts and new technologies and to take part in cultural activities, and by means of the “Associated Schools” Project;
 - the construction of a kindergarten in Nablus, in partnership with UNDP and thanks to a contribution by Japan, for the purpose of developing pre-school education with a view to the creation of a modern society;
 - supplying the “Assad At Tofula” Children’s Centre in Gaza with teaching materials for pre-school education through financial assistance from the Government of San Marino. The Centre was attended by more than 300 children a month and established many contacts with other kindergartens and schools.
- (c) Contribution to the safeguarding of the Palestinian cultural and historical heritage, through:
- the preparation of Palestinian legislation for the protection of the cultural, archaeological and historical heritage;
 - the restoration and enhancement of various archaeological and historical monuments and sites in Jericho (Qasr Hisham, a project funded by Italy), Nablus (Khan Al-Wakalat, a project funded by the European Union, with technical support from Italian experts), Hebron (preparation of the plan for safeguarding the old city with a view to implementing an action plan, a project funded by the World Bank) and Bethlehem (restoration of the “Hosh Al-Syrian” building, a project funded by the Flemish Community of Belgium).

II. RECENT EVOLUTION OF THE SITUATION IN THE PALESTINIAN AUTONOMOUS TERRITORIES

5. Following a series of particularly murderous attacks that claimed many civilian casualties in Israel, the Israeli government launched Operation Defensive Wall on 29 March this year, which led to the occupation of the main autonomous Palestinian towns. The occupation ended in the middle of May. During the occupation, according to information that we have received, many schools were closed while others were turned into barracks or detention centres by the Israeli army. It appears that more than 150 schools were hit by shells. The premises of the Palestinian Ministries of Education and Higher Education were destroyed. Consequently, the whole Palestinian education system has been disabled, owing in particular to repeated curfews, frequent military roadblocks and restrictions on movement.

6. The cultural institutions have also suffered serious damage. Again according to information that we have received, the premises of the Ministry of Culture, in Ramallah, were destroyed and turned into a detention centre. The Ministry’s archives, its documents for the establishment of a Centre of Historical Documentation and its plastic and graphic art collections were confiscated before being transferred to an unknown destination. Likewise, most of the computers were destroyed. Also in Ramallah, the “Sakakini” cultural centre, which benefited from UNESCO’s technical and financial support, was damaged and the Al Kasaba Theatre was turned into barracks by the Israeli army.

7. The destruction by the Israeli army of the installations of Palestinian Radio and Television in Gaza and Ramallah paralysed the remaining Palestinian institutions in UNESCO's fields of competence.

8. In response to this tragic situation UNESCO has received numerous complaints, appeals for help and demands to intervene. Since strict restrictions have been imposed on journalists, and the media in general, information on what is happening is both restricted and difficult to verify. The Director-General has expressed great concern over the issue of press freedom in the occupied territories and condemned, in particular, those incidents where journalists were the victims. He pointed out that the State of Israel was a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and, as such, is bound in particular by Article 19 on "the right to freedom of expression", a right specifically mentioned in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Director-General also expressed his concern at the refusal to allow Palestinian journalists who are foreign press correspondents to renew their press cards. He also called on all the parties to respect the inalienable right of the media to exercise their profession freely and in complete safety.

9. The destruction carried out in the largest town in the West Bank, Nablus, one of the most important repositories of Palestinian culture for many centuries, affected, mainly in the Old City, monuments dating from Roman and Byzantine times, the period of the Crusades, the late Middle Ages and modern times, especially works of art, architecture and history produced between the era of the Mameluk sultans and the Ottoman Empire.

10. The Director-General has repeatedly recalled the importance, wealth and diversity of the Palestinian cultural heritage and asked all Parties concerned to spare no effort to ensure that that precious heritage and its historical and religious values were safeguarded. On 11 April last the Director-General sent the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Israel, Mr Shimon Peres, a letter concerning the damage done to the historic centres of the cities of Bethlehem, Nablus and Hebron and drawing attention to the obligations of the State of Israel as a signatory to the 1954 Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. He also sent a letter to President Yasser Arafat, President of the Palestinian Authority, to keep him informed of the initiatives he had taken vis-à-vis the State of Israel. The Director-General also received an oral message from the Ambassador, Permanent Delegate of Israel to UNESCO, Mr Yitzhak Eldan, followed by a letter from Mr Shimon Peres, dated 22 April last, giving a formal assurance that everything would be done to preserve the Christian monuments of Bethlehem, in particular the Church of the Nativity. In that letter the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs, after recalling "that the present crisis has been provoked by a callous and indiscriminate terror campaign launched against the citizens of Israel" which has claimed "over 400 dead in the past 18 months and more than 120 victims in March alone, not counting the hundreds of wounded and the devastation inflicted on Israel cities, as well as the suffering it has caused the Palestinian people themselves", assured the Director-General that his government was particularly anxious "to avoid, as far as possible, damage to property and innocent individuals, as a matter of policy, especially in populated areas ... and is very conscious of how important it is to protect and preserve monuments of cultural and religious values, for the benefit of generations to come".

11. During that period, the Director-General spared no effort and made diplomatic representations both within the United Nations system and to the political leaders and the ambassadors of the parties concerned.

12. The Director-General attended a meeting on the situation in the Middle East, held by the Group of 77 and the Arab Group. At the meeting the Director-General gave an account of the private talks held in Rome on 10 April between the heads of agencies of the United Nations system and the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr Kofi Annan. To enable the United Nations

system to play its role to the full, the agency heads had agreed that the Secretary-General alone should deal with the political dimension of the issue, and that they should limit and coordinate their own actions. Since the mandate of UNESCO finds fuller expression in the prevention and reconstruction phases than at moments of acute political and military crisis, the Director-General made several proposals concerning the action to be carried out by UNESCO once the conditions on the ground permitted it:

- (i) the sending of a high-level intersectoral mission to establish the needs and priorities for action to be undertaken;
- (ii) the allocation of US \$600,000 out of the carry-over from the previous biennium for priority emergency measures. The Director-General also obtained from the Japanese Government a sum of US \$200,000, in the form of funds-in-trust, aimed at helping Palestinian students studying abroad, since their studies could no longer be funded by their families or the Palestinian Authority owing to the current situation;
- (iii) the reinforcement of the UNESCO Office in Ramallah, by the appointment of an education specialist once the situation allowed it;
- (iv) the encouragement of and support for any initiative from civil society in Israel and Palestine for carrying out joint projects.

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CORRIGENDUM

Paragraph 12(iv) should read as follows:

“(iv) the encouragement of and support for any initiatives from Israeli and Palestinian civil society for carrying out joint projects.”